

September 30, 2002: Commission Recommends 12 Nations for Designation As 'Countries of Particular Concern'

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, today recommended that the Secretary of State designate Burma (Myanmar), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Iran, Iraq, Laos, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Full text of letter to Secretary Powell. Under the law, CPCs are those countries which the Secretary finds to have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Once a country is designated, the IRFA requires the president to oppose those violations by taking specified actions. Such measures can range from a diplomatic demarche to economic sanctions or a waiver of action. "The designation of countries of particular concern is one of the most important human rights acts taken by any U.S. administration," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. "The IRFA requires the U.S. to oppose these egregious and systematic violations, whether the government itself commits them or tolerates them. We hope to see actions commensurate with the severity of these abuses." The Commission also created a Watch List of countries - Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Uzbekistan - where it found grave violations of religious freedom have occurred. Despite the Commission's recommendations over several years that Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Laos be designated as CPCs, the State Department has failed to name them. Today marks the first time the Commission has urged the Secretary to designate India, Pakistan, and Vietnam as CPCs. The Secretary designated Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, and Sudan as CPCs in 1999 and 2000, adding North Korea in 2001 following a Commission recommendation. The full text of the Commission's findings on each country recommended for CPC designation can be found on its Web site at www.uscifr.gov. Copies can also be obtained from the communications office by calling 202-523-3240. Excerpts of Commission findings include the following: The Commission found that in China, particularly severe violations have actually increased in the past year. The Chinese government has intensified its violent campaign of repression against Evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Uighur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and groups - such as the Falun Gong - that have been labeled as "evil cults." This campaign has included imprisonment, torture, and other forms of ill treatment. In India, the government has tolerated severe violence against religious minorities. In 2002, at least 1,000 Muslims were killed and more than 100,000 forced to flee their homes as a result of violence by Hindu mobs in Gujarat State after 58 Hindus were killed on a train in Godhra. India's National Human Rights Commission found substantial evidence of premeditation by members of Hindu extremist groups; complicity by Gujarat state government officials; and police inaction in the face of these violent attacks on Muslims, in which many persons were shot, stabbed, raped, mutilated, and/or burned to death. Christians, too, were victims in Gujarat. Many churches were also destroyed. Although the state government took some steps to prevent further violence, it has failed to hold key violators accountable. The federal government did not take preventive action to impose direct control in Gujarat. And "fear ... is still a palpable reality" for the displaced riot victims. Pakistan has failed adequately to protect religious minorities from sectarian violence. Discriminatory religious legislation, including the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws, helps create an atmosphere of religious intolerance. Attacks against members of the Shi'ite minority by organized groups of Sunni militants continue. Blasphemy charges, often false, result in lengthy detention and sometimes violence, including fatal attacks, against religious minority members as well as Muslims. This year has seen an upsurge in attacks targeting Pakistan's Christian minority. American journalist Daniel Pearl was forced to "confess" his religion as Jewish before being beheaded on a training video by Islamic extremists. Although the government took some steps, it has not brought to justice those responsible for recent attacks. Despite the proposed madrassah reform law, too many religious schools provide ideological training and motivation to those who take part in violence targeting religious minorities in Pakistan and elsewhere. As noted in past years by the State Department, religious freedom "does not exist" in Saudi Arabia. The government vigorously prohibits all forms of public religious expression other than the government's interpretation and presentation of Sunni Islam. Last year, numerous foreign Christian workers were detained, arrested, tortured, and subsequently deported. Shi'a clerics and religious scholars are detained and imprisoned for their religious views, which differ from those of the government. The Saudi government's severe violations of religious freedom include torture and cruel and degrading treatment or punishment; prolonged detention without charges; and flagrant denials of the right to liberty and security of the person, including coercive measures directed against women and the extended jurisdiction of the religious police, who exercise their vague powers in ways that violate others' religious freedom. The government of Vietnam continues repressive policies toward all religions and their followers. A Commission delegation that visited Vietnam in February 2002 found that religious dissidents remain under house arrest or are imprisoned, including Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, who was detained after submitting testimony to the Commission last year. In addition, government officials continue to suppress organized religious activities and to harass leaders and followers of unregistered religious organizations, as well as clergy members of officially recognized religious groups. The Commission also is very concerned about violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments of Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Uzbekistan. Because the governments of these countries have not taken effective steps to halt repression and/or violence against religious believers, nor, in most cases, to punish those responsible, the Commission determined to place them on a new "Watch List." Commissioners Felice D. Gaer and Michael K. Young dissented from

the recommendation that India be designated a CPC. Commissioners Leila N. Sadat and Shirin Tahir-Kheli dissented from the decision not to recommend that Uzbekistan be designated a CPC

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

- Michael K. Young, Vice Chair Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya Sadat Nina Shea The Hon. Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Tad Stahnke, Acting Executive Director